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### Author

Linton, April

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# LANGUAGE POLITICS AND POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE\*

**By April Linton**

University of California, San Diego

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April Linton

University of California, San Diego

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## LANGUAGE POLITICS AND POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

Language policies – established via legislation, court decisions, executive action, or other means – may 1) determine how languages are used in public, 2) abet the cultivation of language skills needed to meet national priorities, or 3) affirm and protect the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain languages. They may also deal with a government's own language use, e.g., by facilitating clear communication, guaranteeing due process, fostering political participation, and/or providing access to public services. The United States has never had a federal language policy. There is no federal agency charged with coordinating decisions about language use or resources. Yet it is impossible for the U.S. or *any* government to be neutral towards language because governments necessarily make choices about which language or languages to communicate in. These choices influence the value of the linguistic capital of various groups in the population, especially immigrants whose native language is not a primary language of the host country. The same is true of the institutional contexts for work and school. In the U.S., the dominance of English in government, industry, education, and popular culture has made it the most important element in the construction of national identity, both as a communicative instrument shared by members of the nation and as a boundary marker affirming their distinction from others (Zolberg and Long 1999).

This essay examines recent attempts to legislate language in light of historical and contemporary debates about immigration and immigrant assimilation. I briefly chronicle U.S. language politics, culminating with the emergence of Official English and English Plus movements in the 1980s and 90s. Next I look at language policy in public schools,

especially ‘bilingual’ education and the backlash against it, and a much less politically charged ‘dual-language’ option. Finally I appraise national language and official English bills recently introduced in Congress in view of data on language usage and preferences, suggesting ways that this resurgence of a national debate about language could impact the larger debate about immigration.

#### A HISTORY OF LANGUAGE POLITICS AND POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

*“What do you call a person who speaks two languages?”*

*“Bilingual.”*

*“And one who knows only one?”*

*“American.”<sup>1</sup>*

Documented concerns about linguistic unity in the U.S. date back to Benjamin Franklin’s opposition to the use of German – at one time the native language of about a third of the residents of Pennsylvania. Bilingualism was very common in the eighteenth century and still relatively common in the nineteenth, when a belief that “American English both reflected and constituted the democratic and rational nature of the country” emerged (Portes and Schauffler 1996:10). For some influential thinkers, this meant far more than establishing a common language for practical reasons. English came to be seen as a crucial unifying element – uniquely suited to define the nation and its citizens (Fishman 1966).

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<sup>1</sup> The original source of this joke is not documented. It is quoted by Portes and Rumbaut (1996:195) and Görlach (1986).

It is not exceptionally American to regard language as a “pillar of groupness” (Edwards 1994:129). Anthony Smith (1971) traces the origins of linguistic nationalism to late eighteenth century German romanticism, particularly to the influence of Johann Herder. Though he was known to enjoy other languages and cultures, Herder’s writings position non-Germans as out-groups. His follower Johann Fitch was more acerbic. Fitch’s famous *Addresses to the German Nation* ([1807] 1968: 58-59) deprecated others’ languages just as it emphasized the importance of his own. He claimed “the German speaks a language which has been alive ever since it first issued from the force of nature, whereas the other Teutonic races speak a language which has movement on the surface only but is dead at the root.”<sup>2</sup> While ridiculous from a linguistic standpoint, this statement draws attention to the enormous power of language, to unite *and* to exclude. Though defenders and promoters of English in the U.S. have not gone so far as to claim that other languages were “dead at the root,” linguistic nationalism is perhaps most interesting when expressed within a nation of immigrants.

Reflective linguistic nationalism, and undoubtedly in reaction to an all-time high level of immigration, Congress enacted an English language requirement for naturalization in 1906. In 1907 it appointed a joint committee, The Dillingham Commission, to study immigration’s impact on the country. Guided by the theories of influential nativist scholars, the Commission concluded in 1911 that new immigration consisted mostly of “inferior peoples” who were physically, mentally, and *linguistically* different and would thus not easily adopt “fundamental American ideals” (King 2000:64, italics added). The Commission urged Congress to impose many restrictions on new

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<sup>2</sup> cited by Edwards (1994:131).

immigration, two of which eventually became law: literacy (in any language) for all immigrants aged sixteen or older in 1917<sup>3</sup> and an annual immigration quota of 350,000 (with sub-quotas based on national origin) in 1921.<sup>4</sup> The Dillingham Commission did not result in linguistically exclusionary federal policies, but it is noteworthy that New Mexico's statehood (granted in 1912) was delayed until, in the words of one prominent politician, "the migration of English-speaking people who have been citizens of other States does its modifying work with the Mexican element" (Baron 1990:8).

World War I heightened anxieties about national loyalty and immigrant assimilation. During and following the war, several states prohibited the teaching of German. The governors of Iowa and South Dakota issued decrees prohibiting the use of any language other than English in public places or over the telephone (Piatt 1990). Schools in many states required children to take language loyalty oaths. A 1919 Nebraska statute banned teaching any language other than English before the ninth grade (Dillard 1985; Marckwardt 1980). In 1923, an Illinois law even targeted speakers of British English, declaring "American" to be the state's official tongue (Tatalovich 1995:63-69).<sup>5</sup> Immigration virtually stopped by the 1930s, due first to restrictive legislation finalized in 1924<sup>6</sup> and then the Depression. The halt in new immigration

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<sup>3</sup>Vetoed by presidents Taft (in 1912) and Wilson (in 1915) prevented literacy restrictions from becoming law until 1917, when Congress overrode Wilson's veto. The law defines "literacy" as being able to write at least forty different words.

<sup>4</sup> By this time, other policy changes had virtually halted Asian (except Filipinos) immigration to the United States.

<sup>5</sup> This law was quietly rescinded in 1969.

<sup>6</sup> The National Origins Act of 1924 established national-origin quotas for immigrants from European countries based on the contribution of each nationality to the total U.S. population in 1890. Its main effect was to limit immigration from southeastern Europe. Immigration from the western hemisphere was not restricted, except that immigrants from European colonies in the Caribbean were able to enter under the quotas of the colonial powers.

encouraged linguistic assimilation among those who were already in the U.S., usually leading to English monolingualism by the third generation. The notion that this pattern is one that immigrants should follow became powerfully entrenched.

In the 1960s, immigration reform, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act provided – collectively – a new basis for minority groups to politically and culturally articulate their ethnic identities. This was a potential window of opportunity for other languages to flourish alongside English. In particular, the position of Spanish in American life became part of the civil rights agenda because the obligation to exclusively use English in the public sphere disadvantaged American citizens who grew up in a Spanish-language environment. Puerto Ricans living in New York, for example, obtained the right to vote in Spanish, obligating the state to provide bilingual ballots. The decades after the Civil Rights Movement have seen a new wave of immigration and a new wave of backlash against it, including efforts to enshrine the status of English.

#### Official English?

Congress first considered declaring English the nation's official language in 1981, when a constitutional English language amendment was introduced by Senator Samuel Hayakawa. Official English legislation (which detractors often refer to as ‘English Only’) is the primary goal of the organization U.S. English, founded by Senator Hayakawa in 1983. U.S. English now boasts 1.8 million members and has established two separate organizational arms: a foundation that sponsors research and English learning opportunities for immigrants, and a lobbying group (U.S. English 2005a). Besides its primary mission of making English the official language of the United States,



the lobbying arm also actively opposes bilingual education and Puerto Rican statehood. A U.S. English (2005b) issue briefing about Puerto Rican status bills in Congress is titled “Avoiding an American Quebec”; the group often refers to Canadian bilingualism as a source of national disunity.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1981 and 2000, twenty-three states passed Official English laws (US English 2005c).<sup>8</sup> Scholarly studies of the Official English movement show that its supporters range from liberals who see English as an important common bond to nativists who view non-English speakers as unwanted aliens (Citrin 1990; Citrin et al. 1990; Frenreis and Tatalovich 1997). It seems, however, that the movement’s success is largely due to its framing of Official English in terms of patriotism, not intolerance. As summarized by John Frenreis and Raymond Tatalovich (1997:365), backing coalesced around “the attitude that speaking English is related to being a good American.” Majority support for Official English laws was “connected to attitudes that are clearly related to this broader issue of national identity, which does not neatly coincide with existing dimensions of political conflict” (p. 366).

On the ground, state-level Official English laws have had little impact on language usage in government or by individuals. States with Official English laws continue to provide documents and services in non-English languages on a level comparable to those with no such laws. A recent phone survey<sup>9</sup> of ninety-two municipal governments revealed that a third of them offer premium pay to Spanish-English

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. English *does* support the continued usage and teaching of Native American languages within tribal jurisdictions.

<sup>8</sup> Four states have older laws on the books, including an 1811 statute in Louisiana.

<sup>9</sup> conducted by Tomás Jiménez, April Linton, and Joyce Lui, University of California, San Diego

bilingual workers. Like the provision of non-English documents and services, these premiums correspond to the needs of the population that teachers, social service providers, police, and other municipal employees serve rather than the presence or absence of a state-level language policy. Cities in California and Florida, where Official English laws are in place, are just as likely to offer bilingual premiums as cities in Arizona and Texas, where no such laws exist. Official English laws also do not seem to influence people's linguistic choices. Research about the contexts that shape U.S.-born Latino adults' maintenance of Spanish alongside English (Linton 2004a) shows no relationship between state Official English legislation and bilingualism or English monolingualism, even with exclusive consideration of Official English laws passed by referendum.

### English Plus?

At least partly in reaction to U.S. English, another set of activists have organized to promote a model of immigrant incorporation that involves learning by people with a long U.S. heritage as well as by newcomers. English Plus has responded to Official English supporters by uniting civil rights and educational organizations to promote "a strong belief that all U.S. residents should have the opportunity to become proficient in English plus one or more other languages" (English Plus 2000). For nonnative speakers, this means acquiring proficiency in English *and* maintaining proficiency in their native language(s). For native English speakers, it means a viable opportunity to become proficient in another language alongside English. Proponents of English Plus view linguistic diversity (and other aspects of cultural diversity) as a national strength that

provides the United States with a “unique reservoir of understanding and talent” (EPIC 1992:152). New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington have passed such measures, which primarily aim to educate the public about language policy issues (Crawford 1997a). In 2005 Representative José Serrano (D-NY) introduced an English Plus resolution in Congress.

## LANGUAGE POLICY IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An ideology that equates English monolingualism or speaking English as one’s language of choice with being an American underlies the way languages are taught in United States schools. Bilingualism and bilingual education therefore raise issues well beyond communication and pedagogy. Schools are a primary vehicle for the transmission of culture and a sense of national identity. They also serve as the gateway to participation in the political and economic arena. School language policy is thus a very powerful and sometimes contentious mechanism for locating languages and their use within the social structure (Linton 2004b).

‘Bilingual education’ refers to curricula developed under the Bilingual Education Act (BEA), Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and subsequent revisions. The original BEA aimed to improve the poor school performance of limited English-proficient (LEP) children from low-income families by providing funds for transitional programs to help them learn English before being placed in regular classrooms. Good intentions notwithstanding, this perpetuated an approach that associated bilingualism with disadvantage, cultural deprivation, and alienation (Schmidt

2000). Even though the sociopolitical climate of the late 1960s and 70s was tolerant of linguistic and cultural diversity, most BEA-funded programs “reflected an ideological assumption that the native language of the LEP student was a problem to be overcome” (Freeman 1998:43). ‘Bilingual’ school programs involve instruction in a child’s native tongue, but their goal is English proficiency, not first-language development or literacy (Snow and Hakuta 1992). Thus, the very term ‘bilingual education’ is misleading, and in fact misunderstood by many Americans.

### The BEA and the Campaign against Bilingual Education

The disconnect between common perceptions and professional practice became clear in the 1980s, when public discourse around bilingual education shifted away from educational opportunity and student achievement and towards language minority groups’ preservation and use of their native languages – a potential threat to national unity. Yet at the same time, educators and policy makers were recognizing the extent to which the U.S. lags behind the rest of the world in the area of foreign language education. The Education for Economic Security Act of 1982 authorized federal funding for the improvement of foreign language instruction, and the 1994 amendments to the BEA reflected this new valuation of bilingualism.<sup>10</sup> These amendments do not acknowledge the claim that immigrant languages pose a threat to the sovereignty of English in the United States. Rather, revisions to the BEA were guided by a growing body of research about how children acquire languages and how they excel in other subjects. The 1994 BEA incorporated new provisions for professional development, language maintenance,

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<sup>10</sup> The full text of the 1994 BEA is available at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/sec7101.html>.

foreign-language instruction, and research and evaluation. “For the first time in its history, the BEA explicitly recognized the value of bilingualism on the individual level for language minority *and language majority* students, and on the national level as a tool for cross-cultural understanding as well as a vital resource in the global economy” (Freeman 1998:55, italics added).

Language rights advocate James Crawford (1997b) summarized the two guiding principles of the 1994 BEA as follows:

- Given access to challenging curriculum, language minority and LEP students can achieve to the same high standards as other students.
- Proficient bilingualism is a desirable goal, which can bring cognitive, academic, cultural, and economic benefits to individuals and to the nation (p. 1).

These goals and ideals laid the groundwork for major reforms in the education of language minority *and* language majority students. But shortly after Title VII was reauthorized, the purpose it embodied came under attack on Capitol Hill and in the press. Reflecting the strongly anti-bilingual political climate, Congress considered repealing the BEA, and ended up reducing Title VII appropriations by 38 percent between 1994 and 1996. This severely undermined the new BEA by forcing deep cuts in grants for instructional programs; teacher training; and research, evaluation, and support services (Freeman 1998:55).

Meanwhile, a move away from bilingual education began to gain momentum. The group English for the Children, founded and directed by physicist and Silicon Valley software millionaire Ron Unz, initiated a national crusade to end transitional bilingual

education. English for the Children was instrumental in introducing and passing anti-bilingual propositions in California and Arizona.<sup>11</sup> These states have adopted policies that place LEP children in structured (sometimes called ‘sheltered’) English immersion (SEI) settings for a limited time (in California, one year) and then transfer them to mainstream classrooms. In structured immersion, English learners are instructed in all subjects in simplified English. A modification of the structured immersion model practiced in some schools involves placing LEP children directly into mainstream classrooms and then supplementing their English learning via pull-out English as a second language (ESL) sessions.

English for the Children drew support from a diverse constituency. Some parents and educators were raising serious concerns about the length of time (in some cases, eight or more years) that children spent in bilingual programs before they were deemed ready to study alongside native English-speakers (Martinez 1999, Tobar 1999). Others remarked that children struggle when they move from bilingual to all-English classes (Alvarado 2001). Increased emphasis and reliance on the outcomes of standardized tests (in English) as measures of school and teacher quality also encouraged school districts to adopt language policies that promote a rapid transition to English, but do nothing to maintain or develop native-language proficiency.

The fact that many bilingual programs were at least as successful as SEI at teaching *English* went largely unnoticed amidst the sudden fervor for English immersion. Why? Proponents of bilingual education alleged that insistence on SEI masked a

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<sup>11</sup> Arizona’s law, Proposition 203, is highly contested and very unevenly implemented.

backlash against immigration. For example, linguists Catherine Snow and Kenji Hakuta (1992) asserted that the debate about bilingual pedagogy was really a debate about politics. Education professor Douglas E. Mitchell and colleagues (1999) reached the same conclusion, though their focus was on the politics of national identity, not immigration.

### California Proposition 227

In June 1998, California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 227, the “English Language in Public Schools Initiative.” The law provides that:

- All public school instruction will be conducted in English.
- Parents or guardians may waive the above requirement if they are able to show that a child already knows English, has special needs, or would learn English faster through an alternate instructional technique.
- Children not fluent in English will receive intensive sheltered English immersion for a short time, not normally exceeding one year.
- The state will appropriate \$50 million per year for ten years to fund programs that provide children with English tutoring.
- Parents or guardians may file enforcement suits (1998 California Primary Election Voter Information Guide, summarized in Salehyan [2002]).

Despite opposition by teachers’ unions and many Latino organizations, Proposition 227 received 61 percent of the vote, with support coming from almost all regions of California. Though Republicans were more likely than Democrats to vote in favor of 227, the issue was not central to either party’s campaign. Polls showed that the two characteristics most strongly associated with a *yes* vote for Proposition 227 were

beliefs that bilingual education is ineffective, and that Americans should speak English (Alvarez 2002).

Educators' and immigrant parents' responses to Proposition 227's passage were extremely varied. A spokesperson for the San Francisco schools immediately stated the district's intent regarding the new law as one of doing "everything possible legally and legislatively to maintain our bilingual programs" (Puente and Morello 1998). In the San Francisco metropolitan area, which is about 15 percent Latino, more than 20 percent of parents of LEP children took advantage of the waiver provision almost immediately.

In contrast, only 3.5 percent of LEP students in the 44-percent-Latino Los Angeles metro area had waivers at the start of the 1998-99 school year. It appears that the Los Angeles Unified School District was not promoting waivers, and/or that immigrant parents (most of whom were not able to vote for or against 227) supported English immersion. Both of these explanations could stem from the fact that the quality of a transitional bilingual program usually mirrors the quality of the school in which it functions. In Los Angeles, this often meant poorly implemented programs with substandard materials and high teacher turnover (Hernández 2001, Vaca 2001). There was no reason for school personnel or parents to struggle to sustain a bad situation.

Elaborating on the above, Diana Hernández (2001), Director of Model Bilingual Programs in Los Angeles stressed that immigrant parents clearly associate English with economic success, and felt that transitional bilingual classes were holding their children back. Even in the better programs, parents often did not understand the pedagogy (e.g., what an accent means and that it will disappear with time, or that reading skills are



transferable from one language to another), and school personnel did a poor job of explaining it. The debate over Proposition 227 forced educators to defend effective transitional programs. At the same time, poorly managed programs provided grist for Proposition 227 supporters' arguments.

In the years following Proposition 227's passage education researchers have taken a closer look at the law's effect on English learners, their teachers, and their schools. A common theme runs through this literature: Proposition 227 created a lot a chaos! The law does not address pedagogical issues around helping LEP students transition to English, nor does it encourage the planning and coordination needed in any successful second language development program (Stritikus 2002). Administrators were left to figure out on their own how they would bring their districts or schools into line with the law, knowing that they could be sued for noncompliance (Stritikus and Garcia 2000). Thus, some districts – particularly those with newer or weaker bilingual programs – enforced very conservative interpretations of Proposition 227 (e.g., the immediate discontinuation of all bilingual education), whereas other districts permitted principals to develop school-specific policies. Districts with well-established bilingual programs were more likely to seek the parental waivers that would allow them to maintain these programs (Gándara et al. 2000, Garcia and Curry-Rodriguez 2000). But even with waivers in place, schools and teachers received inconsistent support for bilingual programs in terms of staff (e.g., program coordinators) and materials (Maxwell-Jolly 2000, Shirling 2000).

Education researchers Tom Stritikus and Eugene Garcia (2000) place the varied responses to 227 into three categories: 1) “Outward defiance” – educators who strongly opposed the law on pedagogical grounds sought waivers immediately. 2) “Clarification” – In districts that were somewhat anti-bilingual education, teachers saw 227 as a way for them to “clarify their mission” in the classroom by adopting English-only policies. On the other hand, 227 clarified the mission of teachers who strongly believed in bilingual education; they viewed waivers as a way to keep public intrusion out of their classrooms. 3) “Anxiety in the face of climate change” – The greatest confusion emerged where there was no ideological consistency between districts, school, and teachers. (p. 5)

The research discussed above shows that the diverse ways in which California school districts, schools, and teachers dealt with the chaos that ensued after Proposition 227’s passage is quite understandable when one considers the contexts that informed their reactions. But from the outside the differing strategies looked like “erratic implementation,” which confused parents and demoralized bilingual teachers whose districts fit into Stritikus and Garcia’s “anxiety” category (Torres 2001:207). In summary of his own and others’ research on the topic, Stritikus (2002) concluded that “227 was not the answer to school and district concern about English language learners” (p. 167).

#### Dual-Language Education: A Countertrend

Since the 1960s, a small but growing number of United States public schools have adopted two-way bilingual immersion programs (also called dual-language, dual-immersion, or two-way immersion). These programs are noteworthy because in them the enrollment of children whose native language is not English as an essential asset, not a

liability or a complication. Language-minority (from a single language background – usually Spanish) and English-speaking pupils learn together, instructed by one or more teachers, from the time they begin school through at least the fifth grade. Program objectives include high academic achievement, bilingual proficiency, biliteracy, and multicultural understanding (Christian 1994). Dual-language programs are never legally mandated and have remained largely off the political radar screen, though they certainly embody the goals of the 1994 BEA and the English Plus movement.

Education researchers and practitioners are paying attention to two-way immersion for several practical reasons. First of all, it is an effective way for English learners to become proficient in English while pursuing an enriched curriculum. Second, it holds great promise as a strategy for diminishing – if not closing – the achievement gap between low- and high-SES students in general, and Latino and white<sup>12</sup> students in particular. And it enhances cognitive, linguistic, and cross-cultural skills (Collier 1989; Freeman 1998, Gómez et al. 2005, Lindholm-Leary 2001, 2003; Orihuela 2003, Thomas and Collier 1997; for more general findings about the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy see Glick and White 2003, Hakuta and Díaz 1985, Lutz 2002, Peal and Lambert [1962] 1977, Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

A more theoretical focus motivates immigration scholars' interest in two-way immersion. These programs exemplify schools' institutionalization of the idea that newcomers to the United States are continually “remaking the mainstream” (Alba and Nee 2003, Bean and Stevens 2003; Hirschman 2005) and that immigrant acculturation is

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the English speakers in dual-language programs are often not white, and that race does not appear to play a role in program outcomes (Linton 2004, cf. Valdés 2002).

a two-way process (Logan et al. 2002; López 1996; Yinger 1994). Dual-language programs also provide institutional backing for selective acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut 1996, 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993): a process through which ethnic networks and strong communities support the children of immigrants as they learn to deal with life in the U.S., with an outcome of upward assimilation combined with bilingualism and biculturalism. Furthermore, by supporting Spanish maintenance two-way immersion could contribute to the replenishment of Latino identities within the U.S. – a phenomenon that is primarily driven by continuous immigration (Jiménez 2005). It also appears that this form of schooling is nurturing or creating transnational and/or global identities that transcend language – among students, parents, and teachers (Castles 2000, Levitt 2001).

Dual-language education is still relatively rare, but the number of programs has been steadily rising since the early 1990s; the Center for Applied Linguistics' directory currently lists 329 (CAL 2006). Proposition 227 notwithstanding, 106 of these are in California. Case studies in five California school districts suggest that while Proposition 227 was a temporary setback for some dual-language programs, in the longer term the law has had little effect on their continuance and growth (Linton, forthcoming). In fact, schools that have initiated two-way immersion in recent years are advantaged in that they have much more research and curriculum development to draw on. Tougher accountability standards for everyone plus extra scrutiny for bilingual programs have driven careful planning, creative grant writing, parent outreach, and frequent evaluation. This has paid off, making it possible for schools in low- to middle- SES areas to establish two-way immersion programs of a quality that rivals older, more elite programs. But

dual-language education will only continue to grow and thrive in California if it remains distanced from political debates over immigration and language policy. This is a challenge that dual-language educators are well aware of. So far continued public support for older programs is propelled by the programs' success at addressing persistent racial, ethnic, and class inequalities in education outcomes, as well as parents' desire for their children to receive a truly multicultural education. Newer programs 'market' themselves to the community by focusing on their enriched curriculum rather than bilingualism per se (Linton, forthcoming).

#### NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE: DOES LANGUAGE MATTER?

After several years of distraction and inaction, George W. Bush has asked Congress to act on his and former Mexican President Vicente Fox's call for a change in U.S. immigration policy. Before adjourning for the summer, the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress considered several proposals for reform. None of these manifest much recognition of recommendations derived from social science research, particularly in terms of shifting enforcement from the border to the workplace (Cornelius 2001, 2005; Massey 2002), incorporating pathways towards citizenship for all immigrants, recruiting immigrants that best serve the country's economic needs, or linking immigration policy with foreign policy (Rosenblum 2006). Current proposals' flaws aside, the Congressional debate has mobilized tens of thousands of immigrants, their children, and supporters in favor of amnesty for undocumented immigrants – as well as a small number of extremely vociferous vigilantes ('Minutemen') who have taken it upon themselves to patrol parts of the U.S.-Mexico

border and harass would-be day laborers. Pushed into a political corner by these overwhelmingly Republican vigilantes and their sympathizers (notably CNN anchor Lou Dobbs), President Bush ordered the mobilization of already-stretched National Guard forces to buttress the Department of Homeland Security's border patrol.

It now seems unlikely that any of the proposals in Congress will become law, but even more unlikely that the current stalemate will kill the immigration debate. Because since 9/11 immigration policy has been linked to issues of homeland security and the 'war on terror', it is probable that anti-immigration activists will retain their focus even if an economic upswing such as the high-tech boom of the late 1990s dissipates their worries about issues of immigration as it affects labor markets or social service expenditures. At the same time, those for whom this issue has been a catalytic event, activating them to exercise political voice, are not apt to recede into the shadows. Many of the protestors who filled the streets of Los Angeles, New York, and other major cities on May 1, 2006 were the U.S.-born children of immigrants. If they are not already old enough to vote they will soon be, and on immigration matters their votes will likely reflect their parents' or grandparents' interests.<sup>13</sup>

Timed to accompany the pro-immigration rallies, a group of Latino musicians released *Nuestro Himno*, a Spanish-language version of the U.S. National Anthem.<sup>14</sup> It can hardly be a coincidence that two-and-a-half weeks later the U.S. Senate voted in support of James Inhofe's (R-Oklahoma) proposal to amend a pending immigration bill

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<sup>13</sup> Jiménez' (2005) research in Garden City, Kansas demonstrates that even where a long span of time without Mexican immigration separates later-generation Mexican Americans and new immigrants, the former sympathize with the plight of the latter.

<sup>14</sup> To listen and read the words in Spanish and English:  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5369145>.

to include a clause making English the “national language” of the United States. Though national language policies are mostly symbolic (e.g., the national language of Ireland is *Gaeilge*), the Senate vote could shore up support for H.R. 4408, and Official English bill introduced on November 8, 2008 by Representative Steve King (R-Iowa). This bill stipulates that all business of the U.S. government, including publications, be conducted in English and that “no person has the right, entitlement, or claim to have the Government of the United States or any of its officials or representative act, communicate, perform or provide services, or provide materials in any language other than English.”<sup>15</sup> Most strikingly, H.R. 4408 would repeal Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which established citizens’ rights to ballots in non-English languages. On August 3, 2006 Senator Inhofe introduced an identical bill, S.3828.<sup>16</sup>

Given that U.S. lawmakers are faced with many pressing domestic and global issues, why are they spending time on language politics? They cannot credibly claim that the economic and social primacy of English is imperiled. Spanish is *not* taking over the country. In fact, U.S. Census data show that bilingualism among U.S.-born Latino adults decreased slightly between 1980 and 2000, in favor of English monolingualism. A survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center (2002) indicates that 89 percent of Hispanics (immigrant and U.S.-born) adults in the U.S. strongly agree with the statement “immigrants need to learn English in order to succeed.” And while it is true that today’s children of Latino immigrants are retaining Spanish alongside English more than in the past, and markedly more than the children of non-Latino immigrants (Alba et al. 2002,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h109-4408>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=s109-3828>

Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Rumbaut 2002), they are doing so as *bilinguals*, not as Spanish monolinguals. To equate bilingualism with disloyalty to the U.S. is thoroughly provincial – a regression towards 16<sup>th</sup> Century ideas of nationhood that had to be transcended in order to establish modern states.

Despite the fact that English-only supporters' fears are not supported by data, it would be unwise to disregard proposals to make English the national or official language of the United States as fleeting notions put forward by extremists in Congress. The strength and longevity of the Official English movement is evidence of this. To the extent that groups such as U.S. English (2004) employ data to garner voter support, they report statistics derived from poll data indicating that a majority of likely voters already believe that English should be the country's official language. Much more powerfully, U.S. English draws on basic notions embedded in American identity. For example, from the premise that 'English is the language of opportunity' it is not far-fetched to assume a link between government services in non-English languages, immigrants' failing to learn English or learning it more slowly, and denial of economic opportunity to immigrants – *even though no such link exists*. On a more subliminal level, activism around national or official English activism taps into perceived threats to an Anglo-Protestant dominated imagination of Americans' way of life (see Huntington 2004, and Anderson 1991 for a thought-provoking discussion of how national identities are imagined). Referring to the emergence of the Official English movement in the 1980s, linguist Thomas Ricento (1995) observed that:

[M]any Americans, especially in large cities, felt their way of life was under assault. The sounds of Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, and



many other languages were heard with increasing frequency in American towns and cities; the American border in the southwest was too porous; projections of demographic patterns showed that older immigrant populations were not replacing themselves as quickly as were the newer non-European groups. (p.1)

Echoing the above, At a recent campaign appearance by California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the vice president of an Orange County Republican club said that although he supported Mr. Schwarzenegger, he wanted the governor to take a harder line on immigration *because he could not bear hearing more and more Spanish being spoken in the county*, and wondered about the legality of the newcomers because “we are being overloaded with a potential hazard” (Archibold 2006, italics added).

These examples illustrate what for some is a clear connection between linguistic discomfort and immigration policy concerns. We do not know the full extent to which American voters make this connection, but it is not trivial. Language politics will undoubtedly influence the contemporary immigration debate in terms of *who should be allowed to immigrate, what is expected of immigrants, and how the children of immigrants are educated*. Yet though the potential implications of a federal Official English policy are far greater than those of a declaration that English is the national language, it is unlikely that voters will differentiate between the two. And if state-level statutes are any indication, even an Official English amendment would not change much in practice.

I suggest two ways that language *should* matter in the immigration debate. First of all, the U.S. government should devote adequate resources to providing ESL courses and community-based resources for adult immigrants. In her exploration of why

immigrants to Canada are much more likely to become citizens than their counterparts in the U.S., Irene Bloemraad (2002) identifies key institutional differences between the two countries. Canadian policy provides “symbolic support and instrumental aid [including funds for teaching English or French] to ethnic organizations and community leaders” (p. 193). In the United States, immigrant incorporation is the domain of state-level policy and civil society.<sup>17</sup> This results not only in lower rates of naturalization but also different *motives* for naturalization. The Portuguese immigrants Bloemraad interviewed in Boston stated no particular reasons for their choices to naturalize or not; it did not seem important to them. But among their counterparts in Toronto there was a clear narrative of naturalization as a gateway to participatory citizenship. This suggests not only that the Canadian government’s approach to immigrant incorporation is more pragmatic but also that, in the U.S., explicit or implicit assimilationist policies that marginalize new immigrants on the basis of language, race, and class hinder rather than encourage assimilation.

My second suggestion derives from the less-addressed idea that immigration policy can be a foreign policy tool (Rosenblum 2006). By far the most common foreign languages taught in U.S. primary and secondary schools are Spanish and French; very few schools offer Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and other languages that the government deems critical for national defense and economic security (Black 2006). Learning a language is not simply a matter of memorizing the words; students must also master the cultural contexts within which speech occurs. Ideally this implies an extended

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<sup>17</sup> Refugees to the U.S. do receive federal assistance, which can include ESL instruction, via the Department of Health and Human Services.

stay in a place where the target language predominates, but many residents of Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Asia who are not native English speakers learn fluent English without ever stepping onto a plane. Why? We cannot ignore the international reach of English in all domains including popular media. There are more potential reasons that, say, a native speaker of Urdu might want to learn English than visa-versa (and these reasons have little to do with the policies of the country she lives in). But if the U.S. government truly values multiple linguistic competencies among its citizens, it needs a policy that favors immigrants who can teach languages that are rare and increasingly valuable here. Young Americans exhibit an embarrassingly low level of understanding of world populations and cultures. A National Geographic Education Foundation study (2006) shows that among eighteen to twenty-four year olds in the U.S.:

- 63 percent could not locate Iraq on a map.
- 60 percent do not speak a foreign language with fluency.
- 20 percent think Sudan is in Asia.
- 48 percent believe most people in India are Muslim.
- 47 percent think it is “important but not absolutely necessary” to speak a foreign language, and 38 percent say it is “not too important.”

An immigration policy crafted with an eye towards remedying geographic and cultural illiteracy and linguistic disadvantage would also buttress national security and the U.S.’s position in the global economy.<sup>18</sup> And it would promote a more additive concept of immigrant acculturation, in sharp contrast to language and immigration policies designed to perpetuate a United States in which most people are English

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<sup>18</sup> I have absolutely no interest in furthering U.S. hegemony in global markets. But of late the divergence between U.S. immigration/border patrol and trade/labor policies has become too striking to ignore.

monolinguals and immigrants are not encouraged to maintain their languages alongside English. By now it should be clear that globalization presents opportunities and challenges that can not all be met in English or understood via the lens of American culture. To preserve and expand Americans' linguistic and cultural capabilities, the U.S. government would do well to design and implement policies that regard speakers of non-English languages as resources rather than threats, and that promote bilingualism for *all* Americans.

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